

Psalm 119— Logotechnical Analysis

Guidelines

- Please read the [General Introduction](#) as well as the Introduction to [Book I](#) and [Book V](#).
- For common features found in the numerical analysis charts, see the [Key to the charts](#).

Specific features of Psalm 119

- This alphabetic acrostic is the longest psalm: 176 verselines and 1063 words (MT1064). Together with Psalm 118, it functions in Book V as a bridge between two well-defined cycles, the First Group of Eleven Psalms (107-117) and the Songs of Ascents (120-134).
- This unique psalm can be described as a many-coloured mosaic of statements and thoughts dealing with YHWH's commandments and precepts. This makes it extremely difficult to grasp its compositional structure in terms of verbal content.

However, the formal structure of the psalm appears to be singularly lucid, that is to say, its macrostructure: cantos, sub-cantos and canticles. Its microstructure, the division of the 8-verseline alphabetic canticles into strophes, shows no consistent pattern. One can find **2** strophes of 4 verselines, or **3** of 3+3+2, 3+2+3, or 2+3+3 verselines, or **4** of 2 verselines each. The number of strophes varies from 44 (Christensen) to no less than **85** (Fokkelman), which demonstrates the uncertainty in regards the division of the canticles into smaller units. My impression is that the author did not endeavour to structure the 8-verseline canticles as well.

Being an alphabetic acrostic, the 176 verselines of the psalm divide into **22** canticles of **8** verselines each. The **22** canticles, in their turn, divide into **7** units of **3** canticles having **24** (3 x 8) verselines each, leaving **1** canticle of **8** verselines. The location of this single canticle is disputed. It can either be identified as part of a **32**-verseline unit (24 + 8) at the end of the poem (vs. 169-176), as proposed by Van der Lugt, or may be combined with the 3 central canticles to constitute a **32**-verseline unit (vs. 73-104) to constitute the centre of the menorah pattern of the psalm, as advocated by Christensen and myself.

The **24**-verseline structure is highlighted by the **24** occurrences of the name YHWH.

The use of **8** verselines in each canticle is determined by the **8** synonyms for the *torah*.

Strophic structure - Canto/Stanza boundary: || Sub-canto boundary: |

- Van der Lugt divides the **22** canticles into **7** sub-cantos in the pattern 3x8 | 3x8 || 3x8 | 3x8 || 3x8 | 3x8 || 4x8. The sub-cantos, in their turn, are grouped into **4** cantos: 6x8 || 6x8 || 6x8 || 4x8. Therefore, the 176 verselines (MT verses) display the following structure:

Verses 1-8, 9-16, 17-24 | 25-32, 33-40, 41-48 || 49-56, 57-64, 65-72 | 73-80, 81-88, 89-96 || 97-104, 105-112, 113-120 | 121-128, 129-136, 137-144 || 145-152, 153-160, 161-168 | 169-176.

- Fokkelman finds **85** strophes, grouped into 19 “octets/stanzas of four S-strophes, 2 L-strophes and 1 S-strophe in Aleph, Zayin and Lamed.” The 176 verselines are all bicolic, except vs. 48, 145 and 176, which he takes as tricola. He divides the first octet into vs. 1-3, 4-5 and 6-8 (pattern 3 + 2 + 3), but the rest of the text into pairs of two verselines. However, this pattern is interrupted by four strophes with 3 verselines: first, vs. 49-51 and 52-54, and second, vs. 89-91 and 94-96. Because of the three tricola, the 176 verselines have 355 cola (352 + 3).

- Labuschagne: I concur with Van der Lugt's division of the text into 24-verseline sub-cantos. However, because I see no cogent reason for grouping the sub-cantos into larger, 48-verseline cantos, I divide the **22** canticles into **7** units outlined in a menorah pattern, which I call cantica, in line with Christensen's terminology. Moreover, I locate the divergent **32**-verseline canticum not at the end, but at the centre of the menorah. The pattern is: 24 || 24 || 24 || **32** || 24 || 24 || 24, or 3x8 || 3x8 || 3x8 || **4x8** || 3x8 || 3x8 || 3x8.

The 176 Masoretic verses divide into:

1-8, 9-16, 17-24 || 25-32, 33-40, 41-48 || 49-56, 57-64, 65-72 || 73-80, 81-88, 89-96, 97-104 || 105-112, 113-120, 121-128 || 129-136, 137-144, 145-152 || 153-160, 161-168, 169-176.

Significantly, the 32-verseline canticum at the middle of the menorah, vs. 73-104, consists of 204 (12 x 17) words in MT, but 203 in the emended text (see note on p. 4).

- Christensen (www.bibal.net) discerns a regular structure of the 22 alphabetic units ('cantos') and finds 44 strophes of 4 verselines each. The 22 'cantos' are outlined in a 'nested' menorah pattern, a menorah within a menorah within a menorah, as follows:

1-8, 9-16, 17-24 {25-32, 33-40, 41-48 [49-56, 57-64, 65-72 (73-80, 81-88, 89-96, 97-104) 105-112, 113-120, 121-128] 129-136, 137-144, 145-152} 153-160, 161-168, 169-176.

Additionally, on prosodic grounds, he detects a larger sevenfold structure, which is supposed to overlie his presumed 'nested' menorah structures. It consists of 7 cantica outlined in a menorah pattern, which is similar to the menorah I propose. The 176 Masoretic verses divide into: 1-24, 25-48, 49-72, 73-104, 105-128, 129-152, 153-176.

Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Though I doubt that the author consciously structured the 22 canticles according to a fixed pattern, for practical purposes, in my survey, I use the pattern 3 + 3 + 2, which seems to be present in the first canticle.
- The numbering of the verselines coincides with that of the Masoretic verses.

			Total	a	b
	⌘ ⌘ ⌘	119:1-3	18	= 13	+ 5
	⌘ ⌘ ⌘	119:4-6	17	= 13	+ 4
	⌘ ⌘	119:7-8	13	= 6	+ 7
⌘	Canticle 1	Total, 119:1-8	48	= 32	+ 16
	כ כ כ	119:9-11	20	= 11	+ 9
	כ כ כ	119:12-14	16	= 13	+ 3
	כ כ	119:15-16	9	= 4+	5
כ	Canticle 2	Total, 119:9-16	45	= 28	+ 17
	ג ג ג	119:17-19	18	= 12	+ 6
	ג ג ג	119:20-22	19	= 10	+ 9
	22 Opening verselines, vs. 1-22				130
	ג ג	119:23-24	13	= 10	+ 3
ג	Canticle 3	119:17-24	50	= 32	+ 18
	<u>Canticum I Total, 119: 1-24</u>		143	= 92	+ 51
	ד ד ד	119:25-27	15	= 11	+ 4
	ד ד ד	119:28-30	16	= 10	+ 6
	ד ד	119:31-32	11	= 5	+ 6
ד	Canticle 4	Total, 119:25-32	42	= 26	+ 16
	ה ה ה	119:33-35	18	= 15	+ 3
	ה ה ה	119:36-38	18	= 14	+ 4
	ה ה	119:39-40	12	= 7	+ 5
ה	Canticle 5	Total, 119:33-40	48	= 36	+ 12
	ו ו ו	119:41-43	21	= 13	+ 8
	ו ו ו	119:44-46	16	= 13	+ 3
	ו ו	119:47-48	12	= 12	+ 0
ו	Canticle 6	Total, 119:41-48	49	38	+ 11
	<u>Canticum II Total, 119:25-48</u>		139	= 100	+ 39

	ז ז ז	119:49-51	19 = 10 + 9
	ז ז ז	119:52-54	16 = 14 + 2
	ז ז	119:55-56	<u>12 = 7 + 5</u>
ז		Canticle 7 Total, 119:49-56	47 = 31 + 16
	ח ח ח	119:57-59	17 = 11 + 6
	ח ח ח	119:60-62	19 = 11 + 8
	ח ח	119:63-64	<u>13 = 11 + 2</u>
ח		Canticle 8 Total, 119:57-64	49 = 33 + 16
	ט ט ט	119:65-67	20 = 12 + 8
	ט ט ט	119:68-70	20 = 12 + 8
	ט ט	119:71-72	<u>14 = 8 + 6</u>
ט		Canticle 9 Total, 119:65-72	54 = 32 + 22
		Canticum III Total, 119:49-72	150 = 96 + 54

Vs. 73-104	Middle of the	י י י	119:73-75	19 = 11 + 8
	menorah pattern	י י י	119:76-78	20 = 12 + 8
		י י	119:79-80	<u>12 = 7 + 5</u>
		Canticle 10 Total, 119:73-80	51 = 30 + 21	
	Note on v. 82*	כ כ כ	119:81-83	17 = 10 + 7
		כ כ כ	119:84-86	20 = 10 + 10
		כ כ	119:87-88	<u>12 = 5 + 7</u>
		Canticle 11 Total, 119:81-88	49 = 25 + 24	
		Total, 119:73-88	<u>100 = 55+ 45</u>	
		First Half Total, 119: 1-88	532 = 343 + 189	

Arithmetic Centre: 1063 = 529 + 5 + 529 אֲשֶׁמְרָה עֲדוֹת פִּיךָ לְעוֹלָם יְהוָה

	529 = 23 x 23	ל ל ל	119:89-91	17 = 8 + 9
		ל ל ל	119:92-94	19 = 10 + 9
		ל ל	119:95-96	<u>13 = 8 + 5</u>
		Canticle 12 Total, 119:89-96	49 = 26 + 23	
		מ מ מ	119:97-99	21 = 9 + 12
		מ מ מ	119:100-102	19 = 10 + 9
		מ מ	119:103-104	<u>14 = 8 + 6</u>
		Canticle 13 Total, 119: 97-104	54 = 27 + 27	
		Canticum IV Total, 119:73-104	203 = 108 + 95	

	נ נ נ	119:105-107	16 = 8 + 8
	נ נ נ	119:108-110	20 = 12 + 8
	נ נ	119:111-112	<u>13 = 9 + 4</u>
נ		Canticle 14 Total, 119:105-112	49 = 29 + 20
	ס ס ס	119:113-115	15 = 8 + 7
	ס ס ס	119:116-118	18 = 9 + 9
	ס ס	119:119-120	<u>13 = 8 + 5</u>

ו	Canticle 15 Total, 119:119-120	46 = 25 + 21
	ע ע ע 119:121-123	17 = 9 + 8
	ע ע ע 119:124-126	16 = 12 + 4
	ע ע 119:127-128	<u>16 = 10 + 6</u>
ז	Canticle 16 Total, 119:121-128	<u>49 = 31 + 18</u>
	Canticum V Total, 119:105-128	144 = 85 + 59
	פ פ פ 119:129-131	17 = 10 + 7
	פ פ פ 119:132-134	19 = 9 + 10
	פ פ 119:135-136	<u>14 = 7 + 7</u>
ח	Canticle 17 Total, 119:129-136	50 = 26 + 24
	צ צ צ 119:137-139	16 = 8 + 8
	צ צ צ 119:140-142	16 = 11 + 5
	צ צ 119:143-144	<u>10 = 8 + 2</u>
ט	Canticle 18 Total, 119:137-144	<u>42 = 27 + 15</u>
	ק ק ק 119:145-147	16 = 12 + 4
	ק ק ק 119:148-150	16 = 9 + 7
	ק ק 119:151-152	<u>12 = 6 + 6</u>
י	Canticle 19 Total, 119:145-152	44 = 27 + 17
	Canticum VI Total, 119:129-152	136 = 80 + 56
	ר ר ר 119:153-155	19 = 9 + 10
	ר ר ר 119:156-158	18 = 9 + 9
	ר ר 119:159-160	<u>14 = 7 + 7</u>
יא	Canticle 20 Total, 119:153-160	51 = 25 + 26
	ש ש ש 119:161-163	18 = 10 + 8
	ש ש ש 119:164-166	18 = 10 + 8
	ש ש 119:167-168	<u>12 = 6 + 6</u>
יב	Canticle 21 Total, 119:161-168	<u>48 = 26 + 22</u>
	ת ת ת 119:169-171	17 = 10 + 7
	ת ת ת 119:172-174	18 = 9 + 9
	ת ת 119:175-176	<u>14 = 10 + 4</u>
יג	Canticle 22 Total, 119:169-176	<u>49 = 29 + 20</u>
	Canticum VII Total, 119:153-176	148 = 80 + 68

22 Concluding verselines, vs. 155-176 **136**

Second half	Total, 119: 89-176	531 = 298 + 233
	Total, 119:1-176*	1063 = 641 + 422

* In MT, the word לְאֹמֵר in v. 82b is obviously a scribal error due to dittography. Since this word is very unusual in poetry, and in this case totally unnecessary, I follow Bardtke's suggestion to delete it. Pss. 71:11 and 105:11 are exceptions, where לְאֹמֵר does seem to have a function. The effect of the emendation is that the psalm has 1063 instead of 1064 words.

Observations

1. In terms of verselines, the arithmetic middle of the psalm falls between the verseline with initial *kaph* (v. 88) and the verseline with initial *lamedh* (v. 89): vs. 1-88 || vs. 89-176. In terms of the 1063 words, the text divides into 532 | 531, which means that the middle word falls in v. 88b, פִּיךָ, 'your mouth' (1063 = 531 + 1 + 531). By adding two words on either side, we find a very meaningful centre situated astride the arithmetic middle of the poem, flanked by **529 (23 x 23)** words on either side (1063 = **529 + 5 + 529**). The five words have altogether **22** letters, which may be consciously designed to match the **22** canticles. The pivotal words express in a nutshell what the psalm is all about. No wonder that it echoes in various phrasings and fashions through the entire psalm.

וְאֶשְׁמְרָה עֲדוֹת פִּיךָ לְעוֹלָם יְהוָה

And I will keep the testimonies of your mouth for ever, YHWH.

If the author had planned a larger meaningful centre in terms of the 22 canticles, the first candidate may be the middle *two* canticles with initial *kaph* and *lamedh* (Canticles 11-12) vs. 81-96, consisting of **16** verselines.

Another option would be the middle *four* canticles with initial *yodh*, *kaph*, *lamedh*, *mem* (Canticles 10-13), vs. 73-104, which have **32** verselines. As I shall demonstrate below, this particular passage constitutes the centre of a distinct menorah. The fact that, relatively speaking, this centre is extremely large, does not pose a problem, because in this psalm everything is large-scale.

2. Let us now consider the compositional structure of the psalm in search of the basic framework that orders its 22 alphabetic canticles. Since there is little consensus among scholars about the poem's structure in terms of content, in my judgement, the only approach that will open new perspectives, is to focus primarily on the formal aspects of the text, more specifically on the numerical factors. The verbal content can serve as a means to control, verify or falsify the conclusions drawn from the formal analysis.

In the case of Psalm 119, with its strict organisation of the text in a carefully composed numerically determined eightfold alphabetic acrostic, such a formal approach is most appropriate. In a still unpublished manuscript – an analysis of Psalms 42-150 -, Pieter van der Lugt offers a new proposal for its compositional structure.

According to his findings, the **22** canticles have a regular verseline structure. They are composed in the pattern (to be found especially in vs. 137-152 and 169-176):

$$8 = 3 + 3 + 2, \text{ or } 2 + 2 + 2 + 2.$$

More importantly, he divides the **22** canticles into **4 cantos** in the pattern:

$$6 \times 8 \parallel 6 \times 8 \parallel 6 \times 8 \parallel 4 \times 8,$$

which divide, in their turn, into **7** sub-cantos in the pattern:

$$3 \times 8 \mid 3 \times 8 \parallel 3 \times 8 \mid 3 \times 8 \parallel 3 \times 8 \mid 3 \times 8 \parallel 3 \times 8 + 8.$$

Canto I	vs. 1-48	48 verselines	Sub-cantos I.1 and I.2:	24 + 24 verselines
			1-8, 9-16, 17-24 25-32, 33-40, 41-48	
Canto II	vs. 49-96	48 verselines	Sub-cantos II.1 and II.2:	24 + 24 verselines
			49-56, 57-64, 65-72 73-80, 81-88, 89-96	
Canto III	vs. 97-144	48 verselines	Sub-cantos III.1 and III.2:	24 + 24 verselines
			97-104, 105-112, 113-120 121-128, 129-136, 137-144	
Canto IV	vs. 145-176	32 verselines	Sub-cantos IV.1 and IV.2:	24 + 8 verselines.
			145-152, 153-160, 161-168 169-176.	

Though I find Van der Lugt's division of the text most convincing, I venture to offer an alternative, which is based on his **24**-verseline sub-cantos. However, I propose to arrange the **7** sub-cantos in a slightly different way: in a menorah pattern. To avoid confusion, I call his sub-canto a 'canticum', in line with Christensen's terminology.

The Italian word 'canto', which is derived from Latin *cantus*, 'song', is defined as 'a *chief* division of a long poem'. Dante's *Divina Commedia*, e.g., is divided into **34** cantos, and Byron's *Don Juan* into **17** (cf. A.F. Scott, *Current Literary terms: A Concise Dictionary*, MacMillan Press, 1979). In fact, 'canticle' is also derived from Latin: *canticulum*, which means 'little canto'. In this case, the Latin term *canticum* is most appropriate for describing the **7** main divisions of Psalm 119. Interesting to note is that in Roman plays, the Cantica were sung or recited to musical accompaniment.

Canticum I	vs. 1-24	3 canticles	24 verselines	143 words
Canticum II	vs. 25-48	3 canticles	24 verselines	139 words +
Canticum III	vs. 49-72	3 canticles	24 verselines	150 words = 289 (17x17)
Canticum IV	vs. 73-104	4 canticles	32 verselines	203 words
Canticum V	vs. 105-128	3 canticles	24 verselines	144 words
Canticum VI	vs. 129-152	3 canticles	24 verselines	136 (8 x 17) words
Canticum VII	vs. 153-176	3 canticles	24 verselines	148 words.

The pivotal position of **Canticum IV** with its **32** verselines, is emphasized by the fact that it is flanked by **72** verselines on either side: $72 + 32 + 72$, which means that it is embraced by **104 (4 x 26)** verselines: $72 + 32 = 104 = 32 + 72$. This may be adduced as evidence corroborating my suggestion to regard Canticum IV as the larger meaningful centre of the poem. It comprises the **4 middle canticles** with initial **י, כ, ל, מ**, spelling the word **מלכי**, 'my king'. Compare Observation 2 in my Analysis of [Psalm 145](#)! For another example of a hidden acrostic, see Specific Feature 4 in my Analysis of [Psalm 9-10](#).

3. Christensen found a similar menorah, outlined in **7** units, which he calls 'cantica' to indicate the sections of the poem larger than the canticle. His menorah is determined "primarily on prosodic grounds in terms of the inverse concentric arrangement in the distribution of SAS (syntactic accentual-stress) units":

A	Wisdom teaching: the way of <i>Torah</i> is the preferred way	Canticum 1	119:1–24
B	Expressing his lament, the psalmist says: "Keep me alive"	Canticum 2	119:25–48
C	Prayers to YHWH as master teacher; intensifies interiority	Canticum 3	119:49–72
X	Privilege of servitude—God's will as moral obedience	Canticum 4	119:73–104
C'	Prayer as "free-will offering" and fidelity in life or in death	Canticum 5	119:105–128
B'	Trust in God's nearness as our defence attorney (savior)	Canticum 6	119:129–152
A'	With the agony of torment unabated there is hope	Canticum 7	119:153–176

In addition to this perfect and simple menorah, with which I fully concur, Christensen presents - as he does with many other psalms - a much more detailed chiastic pattern which he calls a 'nested' menorah - a menorah within a menorah within a menorah. This appears to me to be so complicated an arrangement that I cannot imagine it being correct, or even intended by the author. To my mind, it blurs our understanding of the text rather than enhancing it.

4. Seeing the curious pattern of the **22** canticles with their **8**-verselines, the question arises why the author did not use the number of fullness, **7**, to compose his alphabetic acrostic as **22 septets**. Compare the structure of the Book of [Lamentations](#), which has **154** Masoretic verses (**7 x 22**).

We can of course speculate about the reason behind his choice for the number **8**, e.g., that it is the number of 'overcompleteness' ($7 + 1$), but there is a better explanation, which is both simple and, in my opinion, decisive. The use of the number **8** as major structuring device has everything to do with the **8** synonyms used in Psalm 119 to indicate YHWH's *torah*, the embodiment of all his commands and instructions.

The synonyms appear throughout the psalm in random order, depending on the context, either in singular or plural form. Here they are, in alphabetic order:

אמרה	saying utterance promise
דבר	word
חק	statute prescription rule
מצוה	commandment
משפט	ordinance decision judgement
עדות	stipulation testimony provision obligation
פקודים	precepts instructions
תורה	direction instruction law.

In almost every single verse, right through the **176 (8 x 22)** verselines of the psalm, one of these eight synonyms occurs (only one per verse). The exceptions are: first, **v. 3**, where we find **בְּדַרְכָּיו**, ‘by his ways’, second, **v. 90**, where we read **אֱמוּנָתְךָ**, ‘your faithfulness’, and third, **v. 122**, which lacks any of the synonyms.

In a fourth case, **v. 37**, the words **בְּדַרְכְּךָ תַּיִּי**, ‘give me life in your way’, are suspect. The Targum and some Hebrew manuscripts (probably correctly) read **בְּדַבְּרְךָ**, ‘by your word’. See *BHS* and compare vs. 25 and 107 for the expression **תַּיִּי כְּדַבְּרְךָ**, ‘give me life according to your word’.

However, there is more to it, if we consider the spread of the synonyms. In six canticles all 8 synonyms occur in all 8 successive verselines: Canticle 5 (vs. 33-40 – see above), Canticle 6 (vs. 41-48), Canticle 8 (vs. 57-64), Canticle 10 (vs. 73-80), Canticle 11 (vs. 81-88) and Canticle 17 (vs. 129-136).

In the remaining sixteen canticles, **7** synonyms are present, due to the double occurrence of one of them, obviously to achieve **7** occurrences (the number of fullness). There are only two exceptions: Canticle 1 (vs. 1-8) has **6** synonyms, and so has Canticle 12 (vs. 89-96), where we encounter **אֱמוּנָתְךָ**, ‘your faithfulness’, instead of one of the eight synonyms.

5. Having made a word-count of groupings of 22 verselines (1-22, 23-44, 45-66, etc.), in order to see whether there were significant numbers in the 8 groups, I found the following:

vs. 1-22	130 (5 x 26) words
vs. 23-44	129 words
vs. 45-66	132 words
vs. 67-88	141 words
vs. 89-110	139 words
vs. 111-132	131 words
vs. 133-154	125 words
vs. 155-176	136 (8 x 17) words.

It appears that the psalm is opened and closed by the first and last group of **22** verselines, with respectively **130** and **136** words. I consider this to have been consciously designed and not simply a matter of coincidence.

6. I have refrained from registering all occurrences of divine name numbers and their multiples, but the following instances meet the eye immediately:

Vs. 1-24	51 (3 x 17) words after atnach
vs. 4-6	17 words in total
vs. 9-16	17 words after atnach
vs. 25-32	26 words before atnach
vs. 41-44	26 words in total
vs. 77-80	26 words in total, 15 before and 11 after atnach
vs. 73-80	51 (3 x 17) words in total
vs. 89-91	17 words in total
vs. 93-96	26 words in total, 15 before and 11 after atnach
vs. 89-96	26 words before atnach
vs. 97-100	26 words in total, 11 before and 15 after atnach
vs. 109-112	26 words in total
vs. 121-123	17 words in total
vs. 125-128	26 words in total
vs. 129-131	17 words in total
vs. 129-136	26 words before atnach
vs. 145-152	17 words after atnach
vs. 129-152	136 (8 x 17) words in total
vs. 153-160	51 (3 x 17) words in total, with 26 after atnach
vs. 161-168	26 words before atnach
vs. 169-171	17 words in total
vs. 153-176	68 (4 x 17) words after atnach

7. The name יהוה occurs **24** times. As in Psalm 118, the number of occurrences of the divine name has a highlighting function – see Observation 7 in my Analysis of [Psalm 118](#). Here, the **24** occurrences of יהוה subtly highlight the major structuring number **24**. Interestingly, the divine name appears altogether **52** (2 x **26**) times in Psalms 118-119.

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